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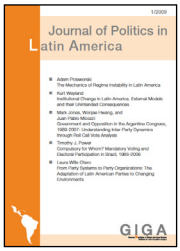

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Analytical Essay

Limits of US Influence: The Promotion of Regime Change in Latin America

Kurt Weyland

Abstract: Scholars often assume that as a global superpower, the United States has had great influence and impact on political regime developments in the world. This article critically examines these claims, focusing on Latin America; by investigating the region most directly dominated by the US, it employs a most-likely-case design. The experiences of countries such as Brazil, Chile, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela show that US influence has been fairly limited for many years and has diminished over time. The Northern superpower has been less involved and has had less impact on regime developments than often postulated, as the analysis of the coups in Brazil in 1964 and Chile in 1973 demonstrates. Moreover, nations to which the US has maintained close, comprehensive linkages, such as Venezuela, have slid into "competitive authoritarianism" while a country such as Haiti, over which the US holds great leverage, has failed to establish a functioning democracy. Thus, even in its direct sphere of interest, the most powerful nation in the contemporary world seems to be limited in its capacity to promote or prevent political regime change.

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Keywords: Latin America, United States, political regime, democracy, great power, regime promotion

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How Powerful Are Great Powers?

Can great powers induce weaker nations to effect political regime change, and successfully forestall regime changes that they oppose? Several scholars have recently answered these questions in the affirmative. For instance, Boix (2011), Narizny (2012), and Gunitsky (2017) argued that the rise and fall of hegemonic powers has considerable influence on the advance of democracy in the world, or its reversal. Similarly, Levitsky and Way (2010) attributed significant effects to the linkages with and leverage of Western countries, among which the United States has the greatest weight. This impact can arise from a variety of mechanisms, ranging from military imposition – as in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Japan after the Second World War, to targeted economic incentives and the inspiration eradiating from success in global power struggles (Gunitsky 2017).

The present article assesses these interesting claims by analyzing the United States' role in Latin America. The predominance that the Northern colossus established from the Spanish–American War (1898) onward is the prime example of hegemony by a liberal-democratic country. Washington's advantage in economic, political, and military resources has been considerable. During the first third of the twentieth century, the US in fact intervened frequently, especially in the circum-Caribbean. For various reasons, Washington sent the Marines into Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, and Nicaragua (Gil 1971: chaps. 4–5).

Given this predominance, US relations with Latin America should provide "most likely cases" (cf. Gerring 2007: 115–122) for corroborating theories about the capacity of great powers to promote political regime change in weaker countries. Some prominent scholars of US–Latin American relations have embraced this line of reasoning. For instance, Kornbluh (2003, 2014) and McSherry (2005) have argued that the US had significant involvement in regime developments on the Southern continent, including the wave of military coups during the 1960s and 1970s.

However, the available evidence suggests more skeptical conclusions (for a broadly similar view, see Brands 2010). It seems that US influence has always been limited. Moreover, this influence declined considerably over the course of the twentieth century; in the new millennium, it clearly does not amount to hegemony. Interestingly, the accelerating declassification of documents has strengthened these arguments. Growing transparency has revealed few "smoking guns" of direct, decisive US involvement; in fact, newly declassified documents often show the limits of US intervention and US influence. For various, often tacti-

cal reasons, the Northern giant usually proceeded with considerable self-restraint. The confusion, internal disagreements, and coordination problems that frequently prevailed among the variety of US actors and agencies has posed further obstacles to effective intervention.

During the Cold War, the coincidence in preferences between the Northern superpower and the powerful elites of its Southern allies made it difficult to perceive these limits of US influence. For instance, many militaries did what the US wanted, especially by fighting the radical left.[1] But they did not do this *because* the US wanted it. Instead, they mainly acted out of their own initiative and would, arguably, have acted in this way even without US involvement. Thus, they did not act in order to fulfill US desires; they shared the same preferences, given their own fundamental interests and orientations.

Moreover, as the global influence of the United States decreased, most noticeably with Vietnam and Watergate, the Northern superpower had ever less impact on political regime developments in Latin America. After failing to suppress the Cuban Revolution, the US also had great difficulty in its persistent, yet constrained efforts to remove the Nicaraguan Sandinistas from power. Military influence only "worked" in microstates such as Grenada or in the thoroughly penetrated client state of Panama. While the end of the Cold War and the emergence of unipolarity seemed to boost US influence in the 1990s, bring market reform, and help consolidate liberal, pluralist democracy in Latin America,[2] the limits of US influence soon came to the fore again with the unprecedented advance of left-wing forces in the region.

The example of, and ample support from, populist Hugo Chávez fueled the proliferation of semi-authoritarian regimes that were critical of US "imperialism." Although this coordinated defiance elicited grave concerns in Washington, US linkage and leverage proved incapable of forestalling it and US foreign policy was unable to reverse it. Even politically weak and economically dependent Latin American countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador (despite dollarization) demonstrated a surprising degree of political autonomy. The limits of US influence became obvious in Venezuela. Hyperinflation, scarcities, repression, and crime are pushing the country toward collapse, but Washington has been powerless and mostly confined to watching this catastrophe from the sidelines.

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1 The reformist military regimes of Panama (1968–1981) and Peru (1968–1975) pursued a much more autonomous course; interestingly, the US had little leverage, as evident in Peru's purchase of military hardware from the USSR.

2 Weyland (2014: 177–182) recently documented the limits of US influence on the "third wave of democratization" in Latin America.

As the US, despite all its linkage and leverage, could not prevent the strangulation of democracy and the installation of (unfairly) competitive authoritarianism in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador, it was also unable to do much to strengthen democracy elsewhere in the region. The most striking failure occurred in Haiti, where substantial foreign aid and diplomatic pressure did not succeed in bringing the installation of the basic mechanisms of democracy. This weak state simply suspended and postponed elections, sometimes for years. As the US lacks the "despotic power" to impose its regime preferences on contestatory left governments, its arsenal of economic resources, political influence, and normative appeal cannot construct the "infrastructural power" (cf. Mann 1984) either that would be required to pull Haiti out of its problems.

As these recent experiences suggest, US influence in Latin America is surprisingly limited. This superpower faces significant obstacles in using its clout and preponderance to shape regime developments on the Southern continent. For better or for worse, Latin American countries have acquired a great deal of political autonomy. The fate of democracy and authoritarianism in the region is quite independent from Washington's desires, especially specific foreign policy initiatives.

Before this analysis can proceed, some conceptual clarifications are in order. Because this article examines US actions and their impacts, it does not define power and influence via a "basic force model," but instead employs a "force activation model" (March 1966; Keohane 1984: chaps. 2–3). Accordingly, power is understood as "the capacity to assert one's will in a social relationship even against resistance, regardless of the source on which this capacity rests" (Weber 1972: 28). Influence, by contrast, denotes a weaker mechanism, which produces only a certain likelihood of compliance; moreover, influence lacks the capacity to break resistance and, therefore, tries to avoid direct conflict by employing incentives, persuasion, and nudging. Hegemony, on the other hand, is a stronger, more lasting mechanism than mere power. Drawing heft from its persistence, it reliably guarantees compliance and discourages the weaker partner from offering resistance in the first place.[3] However, hegemony does not exclude cautious non-conformity on unessential issues (see Williams, Lobell, and Jesse 2012); thus, it is weaker than "rule" (Weber 1972: 28), which seeks to enforce strict compliance and, in relations between states, approximates imperialism.

3 Lake's (2009) "hierarchy" is a consolidated, institutionalized form of hegemony.

A relational notion of power and influence is crucial for investigating US foreign policy and its regime effects. However, by stipulating as the crucial test whether the stronger partner manages to "assert [its] will in a social relationship" (Weber 1972: 28), it raises the difficult issue of how to identify the stronger side's true interests. When a supposedly hegemonic country does not push a weak state very hard, does it simply have limited goals, or does it anticipate resistance or costs and therefore back off – thus demonstrating the actual limits of its power? It is difficult to ascertain an actor's true interests, given the strong incentives for dissimulation; bargaining tactics such as deception, bluffing, and sugarcoating are common. Therefore, wherever possible, the following analysis relies on internal documents that report frank statements by and discussions among leading policy-makers, or historical analyses of such materials. Given the time frame for the declassification of diplomatic documents, this methodological concern makes it useful to extend the study to older cases of US involvement in Latin America. After all, recent events that understandably draw the most acute interest are still shrouded in considerable secrecy.

This historical approach is also important for uncovering the broader tendencies and overall trend of US involvement in Latin American regime developments, rather than attaching excessive importance to recent conjunctures. A longer time frame also helps by increasing the number of cases under investigation. Given continuing disagreements over case selection, the analysis does not single out a few instances of regime change in Latin America, which may be (regarded as) unrepresentative. Instead, I discuss the most high-profile cases occurring from 1960 onward. Of course, the down-side of this "medium-N" analysis is that space constraints preclude detailed, thorough process-tracing based on primary research. As many scholars have already conducted single-case studies, the present article offers some balance by taking the opposite position in the unavoidable trade-off between breadth and depth.

With these goals in mind, I first examine the historical evidence. The next two sections discuss the reduction of US clout during the past century and its surprisingly low level in the new millennium, respectively. The fourth section then presents the main reasons for the limited influence of the Northern superpower, before the conclusion draws some broader inferences.

The Decline of US Influence during the Twentieth Century

There is no question that the United States engaged in unbridled imperialism from 1904 to 1934, especially in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. With the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the US appointed itself as the "policeman" of the Western Hemisphere. Accordingly, perceived misdeeds or offenses by a Latin American government prompted numerous interventions (Schoultz 1998: chaps. 8–11; Smith 2013: 34–39, 52–61). Interestingly, while the Northern hegemon frequently violated national sovereignty with military force, even then it mostly failed to achieve its long-term goals. Rather than implanting political stability and liberal rule in its client states, the US mostly left behind repressive dictatorships or civil wars. In a pattern repeated less drastically in contemporary Haiti, state-building and the forceful installation of constitutional order rarely worked. Foreign military might did not function as an effective tool for domestic political reconstruction. Thus, even at the height of its imperialism, the US did not manage to control regime outcomes, even in countries under its military control.

Moreover, open US imperialism soon came to an end. Persistent diplomatic protests from Latin America, led by Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay, induced the US – which sees itself as a rule-abiding nation – to promise respect for national sovereignty and the end of military interventions. Also, the Great Depression absorbed US attention and made costly foreign involvement inadvisable. Consequently, in 1934, President Franklin Roosevelt foreswore the imperialistic posture and inaugurated a "Good Neighbor Policy." While the US remained involved in Latin America in various ways, this policy change did have a significant impact. Since 1934, the Northern superpower has rarely intervened in Latin America with its own military force. The only sitting government evicted through a direct US invasion was General Noriega's dictatorship in Panama in 1989. In the Dominican Republic in 1965, the US intervened in an open civil war, and in Grenada in 1983, President Ronald Reagan toppled a new leader immediately after a bloody internal coup. Thus, most of the time during the last eight decades, the US has refrained from applying the most powerful tool that great powers have at their disposal.

Of course, over many decades the US could count on the preference alignment and close connections it had established with Latin American militaries. The US did not need to send in the Marines because the armed forces of the region would do the "dirty work" themselves. These affinities were strongest during the Cold War, especially after the

Cuban Revolution, when Washington and many Latin American generals and other elites coincided in perceiving a serious threat of Communism (Brown 2017). Reacting to this specter, both the US and many powerful forces in the Southern continent embraced authoritarian rule as a – seemingly – necessary fortification of state power against the wave of radicalism inspired and fomented by Fidel Castro (Stepan 1971; Rouquié 1987: chap. 8).

While the US preached anti-Communism to Latin American elites, especially the intervention-prone armed forces, it was largely preaching to the converted. Generals, business people, and most politicians in the region had their own very strong reasons for combatting any attempt at radical transformation; their clear and powerful self-interests mandated determined efforts to maintain the established sociopolitical order. Accordingly, anti-Communism had a long tradition inside the region, which preceded US sermons. For instance, while Washington promoted the National Security doctrine from the early 1960s onward, South American militaries had, years earlier, absorbed similar, albeit harsher and more authoritarian French teachings on "revolutionary war," derived from France's painful experiences in Vietnam and Algeria. As Argentine and Brazilian generals highlighted, they regarded these French lessons, which they immediately incorporated in their own training, as significantly more relevant, useful, and appropriate for their own sinister purposes (Fragoso 1959; interview with former Argentine dictator Jorge Videla in Reato 2012: 75–77, 80–84; see also Mazzei 2002; Martins Filho 2012). Thus, the anti-Communist convergence among the Northern superpower and its Southern allies was not the product of US influence, but resulted from an underlying coincidence of "given" interests and a shared perception of threats.

Moreover, while this fundamental interest convergence induced the US to condone and support the imposition of dictatorships in many Latin American countries, it was not directly responsible for the overthrowing of liberal democracy. Washington did not initiate and engineer the coups that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the US criticized, harassed, and in some cases squeezed leftist and populist governments and then approved and backed their eviction, American diplomats and the CIA did not take the lead in these regime changes. Instead, domestic actors, especially military officers, held primary responsibility: They organized and executed the overthrow of civilian rule out of their own initiative. Internal elites had strong reasons of their own to suppress left-leaning experiments. In particular, radical efforts to undermine military hierarchy and discipline or break the armed forces' mo-

nopoly over organized coercion (via workers' militias, for example) prompted a forceful backlash, as evident in the emblematic cases of Brazil in 1964 and Chile in 1973. Thus, the self-interest of the military as an institution was the decisive motive for these coups (Stepan 1971; Rouquié 1987: ch. 8).

Interestingly, in both of these high-profile episodes, American diplomats preferred an electoral solution to the crisis almost until the end (*FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. 31: 409; *FRUS 1969-1976*, vol. 21: 869). For instance, just days before the coup in Brazil, Ambassador Lincoln Gordon commented on "the hypothesis of […] proper presidential elections being held in October, 1965. This would still be the best outcome for Brazil and for the United States if it can happen" (*FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. 31: 413; see also Smith 2015: 263, 265). Besides normative considerations, pragmatic calculations also played a role. After all, US officials believed that in the next electoral contest, centrist or conservative politicians with friendly relations to the Northern superpower would defeat the left-wing incumbents, whose reform efforts were provoking economic crises and social turmoil and thus – the US felt – undermining their support.

However, the US worried that left-leaning presidents would try to forestall impending electoral defeat with all means possible and forcefully perpetuate themselves in power in order to impose their ideological project in non-democratic fashion. Consequently, greatly overestimating this risk, Washington endorsed and supported military preparations to counteract the threat of a left-wing power grab, if deemed necessary, by removing Presidents Goulart and Allende from office. But the US did not assemble the coup coalitions; domestic actors clearly took the initiative. Pragmatic calculations again were crucial motives for the great caution and reserve with which US officials proceeded. After all, both in Brazil and Chile, it seemed for a long time that anti-governmental conspiracies had slim chances of success. Major military leaders, such as Army Chief of Staff Humberto Castelo Branco in Brazil and Army Head Augusto Pinochet in Chile, kept hesitating and joined the coup coalition only when the left-leaning governments seemed to subvert the military institution itself, thereby sealing their fate. According to the available evidence, US diplomats and CIA agents were not instrumental in winning over these pivotal actors.[4]

4 On Pinochet's last-minute decision, see the well-researched account by González (2000: 286–292, 303–311, 317–321).

Instead, once rapidly worsening polarization and confrontation seemed to make a coup more likely, the US deliberately pulled back even more and limited its contacts with generals. Washington understood that direct involvement would hold an enormous risk of back-firing. No self-respecting general wanted to look like a lackey of the Northern "hegemon" (see, e.g., Walters 1978: 382, 390–391, 396; Dulles 1978: 332, 345–348, 377). Moreover, any revelation of US instigation would have played into the hands of the leftist or populist incumbents, who could have promoted anti-Americanism and nationalism and turned these sentiments into powerful weapons against the prospective coup-mongers (*FRUS 1969-1976*, vol. 21: 867–868, 876, 881–882, 892).

In sum, the US did not mastermind the coup wave of the 1960s and 1970s. Recent declassifications of documents indirectly corroborate this claim by not yielding evidence of US instigation. As the archives slowly open, "smoking guns" of direct US responsibility have not appeared; instead, exonerating evidence sometimes comes to light. For instance, his now available diaries show that General Vernon Walters was vacationing in Florida during the period when, according to Haslam's (2005: 167, 169, 182, 211, 219) interview-based claim, he was in Santiago helping to organize the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende (Lockhart 2014).

Based on thorough archival research, historians and investigative journalists have highlighted the autonomy and initiative of Latin American coup-makers. Summarizing his painstaking investigation of Brazil's military regime, including intensive access to leading decision-makers and ample confidential documentation, Elio Gaspari (2002: 102) concluded: "Not one Brazilian, civilian or military, participated in the ouster of João Goulart [in 1964] because the United States wanted that." Similarly, historian Jonathan Brown's in-depth archival studies found that "rather than Washington, it was the Brazilians themselves who set the agenda and the pace for the overthrow" of Goulart. "US diplomats resembled fans cheering for the team on the right, while [the Brazilian] players on the field actually determined the ultimate victors" (Brown 2017: chap. 10).

With regard to the most-discussed coup in Latin America, the 1973 ouster of Socialist Salvador Allende in Chile, historian Tanya Harmer's (2011: 272) well-researched study found that "the United States did not manipulate or force its Chilean contacts to do anything that they did not want to." Instead, the coup-makers expressed "extreme pride that they managed their own coup without the assistance of the USG [US government] or other nations." Longstanding country specialists Simon Collier and William Sater concurred, after highlighting US efforts to

undermine the Chilean economy and back opposition groupings: "It may be doubted, however, whether the CIA made very much difference: sad as it is to have to say this, the real 'destabilization' of Chile was the work of Chileans" (Collier and Sater 1996: 355).

Certainly, despite its limited direct involvement, the coup wave of the 1960s and 1970s broadly conformed to US preferences by forestalling the "dreaded" spread of Communism. While Washington would have preferred much less repression – and in fact pushed for a return to liberal, democratic rule, such as in Brazil from 1964 onward (*FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. 31: 459–460, 489–490, 493–494) – US foreign policymakers were relieved that their worst-case scenario had not come true. Thus, Washington achieved its main goals overall. But because exceedingly powerful elites in Latin America had embraced the same goals and did all they could to promote them, this US "success" does not constitute proof of effective influence or power. The US did not have to overcome an interest conflict, not to mention the breaking of resistance that Weber's above-cited definition mentions.

More indicative of the real extent of US influence and power are instances in which Washington faced leftist challengers but could not count on internal elites to end this defiance. Such cases arose because Latin American left-wingers learned from the ousters of their ideological brethren, beginning with the Guatemalan coup against President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, in which the US did play a crucial indirect role (by outfitting Guatemalan exiles, but not using its own military force). After Arbenz's overthrow, where radicals managed to effect a revolutionary takeover of power and therefore had a fairly free hand in domestic politics, as in Cuba (1959) and Nicaragua (1979), these successful revolutionaries quickly destroyed the remnants of the old-regime military and rebuilt the armed forces from scratch to ensure their total loyalty to the new leadership; with this purpose in mind, Fidel Castro put his brother Raúl in charge in Cuba. These savvy moves did much to protect revolutionary experiments from the wrath of the US and its local allies. Because the Northern superpower saw a direct military invasion as too costly and instead confined itself to efforts at "destabilization" (Stodden and Weiss 2017), Castro managed to turn Cuba into an outpost of Communism right under the nose of the US (Brown 2017), and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas survived the US's wrath throughout the 1980s. The USSR's security umbrella long served as a crucial deterrent against an invasion of Cuba, and the recent trauma of Vietnam placed an insurmountable domestic constraint on President Reagan.

Even more clearly than Cuba's longstanding defiance, the Nicaraguan case shows the limitations of US influence (see, in general terms, Pickering and Peceny 2006: 554–555).[5] Although years of economic sanctions and constant paramilitary harassment eventually contributed strongly to the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990 (Booth 1995), it is remarkable how long this poor, small, and weak country, surrounded by hostile neighbors and facing an inveterate Cold Warrior in the White House, managed to hold out. In the end, the US "won" – but not as quickly and easily as great power theories would predict for the superpower's immediate "backyard." In the imagery of Aesop's fable, the massive lion found it surprisingly difficult to defeat the little mouse.

The 1990s saw a particularly close alignment between the US and most of Latin America, for two principal reasons. First, the region-wide debt crisis forced a wave of neoliberal adjustment and market reform, which induced the Southern neighbors to revamp or dismantle their nationalist, protectionist, and state-interventionist development models. By opening up to the global economy, they embraced – to a greater or lesser extent – the free-market doctrines held dear by the United States. Moreover, trade, investment, and other exchanges with the US increased, limiting Latin America's room for political maneuvering.

Second, from the late 1970s onward, the third wave of democratization had spread civilian competitive rule across the region, in the liberal-pluralist version preferred by the US This groundswell of regime change made Washington's promotion of democracy – its self-proclaimed mission (Smith 1994) in the absence of perceived threats from a rival great power – much easier. Rather than having to push obstreperous dictators to improve their human rights record and relinquish power, the US could now concentrate on helping to preserve democracy, as it did successfully in Guatemala in 1993 and in Paraguay in 1996. Deterring threats is easier than actively promoting change; and in this defensive effort, the US could enlist the regional solidarity among elected presidents and thus share responsibility. Moreover, there was considerable synergy between economic and political liberalization. The increased trade and investment resulting from neoliberal reform exposed Latin American countries to potential sanctions, which the inter-American community could use to forestall or reverse extraconstitutional interruptions of democracy, as it did with some (albeit limited) success after Alberto Fujimori's self-coup in Peru in 1992 (Boniface 2007: 41, 50, 57).

5 In this article, Peceny seems to qualify the stronger claims about US influence and the success of forceful democracy promotion that his earlier book advanced (Peceny 1999: 184, 195–196, 206–213).

Yet, while the region-wide turn to market reform and liberal democracy was in line with US preferences and enhanced Washington's influence for a while, the Northern superpower's clout remained limited. US pressures contributed to change in countries with reasonably firm economic and political institutions, which could be reshaped and then persisted in this transformed state thereafter. Accordingly, threats of sanctions from the US and its Latin American allies forced President Fujimori to back off from his initial plan to impose an open autocracy. Instead, he felt compelled to convoke a constituent assembly, which then restored presidential and Congressional elections as well.

Although these US-led pressures brought back the formal institutions of democracy, which Peru thereafter followed by holding elections on schedule, they were, however, insufficient to guarantee the fairness of these contests and prevent para-constitutional manipulations, such as the permission for Fujimori's second consecutive reelection granted by a government-controlled Constitutional Court. Behind the façade of competitive civilian rule, Fujimori and his aides continued to exert power in non-democratic ways, especially through a massive scheme of simply buying political support with bribes (Carrión 2006).

The case of Haiti offers even more striking evidence for the limited effectiveness of US influence. The leaders of the coup against elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991) held out against strong pressures for quite a while; their ragtag thugs even succeeded in making a US naval task force back off in 1993. Only the imminent threat of a US invasion forced the Haitian coup-maker out and resulted in Aristide's return to office in 1994. However, given the tremendous weakness of Haiti's political institutions, this success did not bring the functioning democracy that the US intended to install. Instead, the country experienced massive electoral manipulation, open fraud, intense inter-branch conflict, and endemic political violence (Peceny 1999: 164–169; Gros 2011; Buss 2015). As in Peru, the restoration of democracy's parchment institutions remained a superficial success; the reality of politics continued to be rather undemocratic.

Even worse, Haitian politics took a further downturn in recent years. Ongoing institutional decay and deepening distrust made it ever harder to follow the formal procedures of democracy. Congressional and presidential elections were postponed, sometimes for years. The US kept pushing for compliance with the political calendar, but often in vain. When a country's institutional infrastructure crumbles and melts away, external pressures lack an effective target and cannot make much difference. Where domestic actors lack real authority and control, foreign

actors with all their enormous clout are practically powerless. Given internal anomie, no external force can impose order – unless they literally take over the failing state. Yet the disappointing experiences of US imperialism during the first third of the twentieth century and of many nation-building efforts thereafter suggest that even such a re-colonization would not be successful in the medium and long run. Thus, the utter weakness of domestic institutions practically disarms overwhelming foreign power.

The Weakness of US Influence in the Twenty-First Century

If the Haitian case demonstrates the limits of predominant power, including military force, then the rise of a contestatory left in a whole group of Latin American countries in the new millennium shows the limited impact of economic, political, and cultural linkages. In their comprehensive study of competitive authoritarianism, Levitsky and Way (2010) argued that extensive connections to Western democracies induce nondemocratic rulers to move toward growing respect for the formal rules of democracy that their constitutions enshrine. In this view, economic incentives, political appeals, and cultural attractions sooner or later turn the façade of democracy into a reality and guarantee free and fair elections conducted in a context of liberal safeguards and pluralistic debate. This reasoning should imply that strong linkages to the West also ensure the preservation of democracy by inducing political actors, especially presidents, to comply with the formal rules of democracy and their spirit.

Contrary to these plausible expectations, however, the last two decades have seen a surprising turn away from liberal, pluralist democracy in several Latin American countries (Lehoucq 2008; Brewer-Carías 2010; Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Weyland 2013; De la Torre 2014), even though these nations have maintained extensive linkages with the US and the remainder of the democratic West. The protagonist of this push toward competitive authoritarianism was Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, a country with a multitude of close connections to the US. These comprehensive linkages rest on a firm, longstanding material foundation, namely large-scale oil exports to the Northern powerhouse that are crucial for Venezuela's fiscal sustenance. Given the special characteristics of Venezuela's "heavy" petroleum, these economic flows entailed high dependence. Whereas US refineries were well-suited for this crude, new customers would face major adjustment problems. Thus, Venezuela's reliance

on the US market proved difficult to diminish; the strenuous diversification efforts of "anti-imperialist" Chávez achieved only limited success. Venezuela's state-owned oil company also held substantial investments in the US, especially a distribution network via Citgo. In principle, the Northern superpower could hold these assets hostage to retaliate against its populist adversary.

For all of these reasons, Chávez seemed to have little room to maneuver when he took power in 1999. Earlier rounds of market reform appeared to restrict his latitude in economic policy-making, and these economic constraints, combined with Venezuela's wide-ranging political and cultural linkages to the US, seemed to secure liberal democracy. However, contrary to these expectations derived from Levitsky and Way's (2010) theory, the new president immediately started to concentrate power, undermine checks and balances, and establish political hegemony (Brewer-Carías 2010). As opposition forces saw few options for responding to this paralegal march toward authoritarian rule, they resorted to open contention, but ended up losing battle after battle. Given the heterogeneity and fragmentation of his opponents and the intense mobilization of his core supporters, Chávez even survived a coup attempt in April 2002, which ended up discrediting his enemies and allowed the president to intensify his concentration of power. As the populist leader increasingly harassed and persecuted opposition forces and cemented his political predominance through the boundless use of state resources, which were swelled from 2003 onward by the global commodities boom, he managed to strangle democracy from the inside and establish a competitive authoritarian regime. Once he had consolidated power, he also radicalized his economic policies, proclaiming his commitment to "socialism" and initiating an expropriation spree directed primarily at private companies from the West (comprehensive analysis in Corrales and Penfold 2010).

The US was aghast at this turn of events, which Chávez accompanied with acerbic "anti-imperialist" rhetoric and a determined effort to construct an anti-hegemonic coalition of leftwing governments in Latin America, including the US's nemesis, Communist Cuba. Although concern in Washington ran high in the first few years of the new millennium, the US proved incapable of exerting any effective influence. The longstanding network of ample linkages clearly failed to deter Chávez's determined reversal of prior market reforms and his suffocation of democracy. As part of their programs to support civil society across the globe, US agencies subsidized and supported interest associations and NGOs that opposed the power concentration in Venezuela (Encar-

nación 2002); but these forces failed to restrain the populist leader or bring about his downfall. Despite suspicions, there is no clear evidence of direct US involvement in the 2002 coup attempt. Of course, if Washington had participated, the striking failure of this haphazard initiative would be another example of the superpower's limited influence.

Once Chávez had survived the coup attempt and had used bureaucratic foot-dragging, massive government spending, and deliberate intimidation to emerge unscathed from a recall referendum, he sat firmly in the saddle of power. Consequently, the US concluded that it lacked any real means for influencing economic and political developments in Venezuela. Indeed, open US involvement was bound to backfire because nationalism and anti-Americanism were among Chávez's favorite instruments for maintaining his mass support. Thus, within a few short years, the Venezuelan leader managed to disarm the linkages and leverage that the Northern superpower seemed to wield over this highly dependent country. The supposed hegemon was revealed as a paper tiger. In fact, although Venezuela is currently suffering a multi-faceted meltdown, the US can do little more than watch from the sidelines as the entrenched leadership clings to power and systematically prevents the opposition from making headway toward ending the crisis.

Not only was the US incapable of forestalling Venezuela's descent into populist authoritarianism, but Chávez inspired several other leaders in Latin America to follow his script by concentrating power and hollowing out democracy (De la Torre 2017). Once again, the Washington proved powerless to prevent the proliferation of contestatory leftism and moves toward non-democratic rule in its own sphere of influence. Just like Chávez, Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006–present) and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–2017) convoked constituent assemblies, used them to expand their presidential powers, pushed with all means for political hegemony, attacked the opposition, and stifled independent news media (Lehoucq 2008; De la Torre 2014; Levitsky and Loxton 2013). In more blatantly extra-legal ways, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua forced through his reelection, engineered his party's total predominance, and dismantled the opposition. Co-governing with his wife, whom he managed to have elected as vice-president, he continued to cement his hegemony (Salinas 2017).

As in Venezuela, this strangulation of democracy happened in countries that maintained dense linkages with the US and were highly dependent on the West. For instance, Bolivia has long benefited from voluminous foreign aid; Ecuador renounced monetary sovereignty and tied itself to the US through dollarization in 2000; and Nicaragua signed a

regional free trade agreement with the Washington right before Ortega returned to power. But all these forms of linkage and the resulting US leverage were not enough to prevent those presidents from undermining liberal, pluralist democracy and from moving toward authoritarian rule. At the same time, Morales and Correa also abandoned "neoliberalism" and embraced economic nationalism and heavy state-interventionism; indeed, Bolivia enacted a number of nationalizations à la Chávez. Strikingly, even countries that were significantly smaller, weaker, and more dependent than Venezuela managed to move in economic and political directions that the global superpower clearly disliked. However, the US was unable to respond effectively as the anti-Americanism fomented by these leftwing leaders hindered any effective pressure.

The only instance in which a similar effort to follow Chávez's populist script was stopped occurred in 2009 in Honduras. There, elitist conservative Manuel Zelaya unexpectedly morphed into a leftist populist and, attracted in part by Venezuelan oil subsidies, joined Chávez's regional alliance. When Zelaya started pushing for a constituent assembly toward the end of his presidential term, the opposition in Congress, the courts, and much of civil society, including his own former party friends, foresaw the specter of a move toward populist authoritarianism. They used their own electoral legitimacy and institutional bastions for persistent efforts to block Zelaya's political offensive. The president did not give up, however, disregarding multiple court orders and trying to take control of the military to enforce his will. As a last resort, the Supreme Court asked the armed forces to depose the president, whom they unconstitutionally evicted from the country (Ruhl 2010; Taylor-Robinson and Ura 2012: 114–119). While it is not fully clear what Zelaya's exact intentions were; and while his low support makes it doubtful that he could have achieved his goals, the opposition firmly believed that this drastic step was required to prevent the self-perpetuation of this populist leader. About half of Honduras' citizenry and civil society shared this view and supported the pushy president's ouster (Taylor-Robinson and Ura 2012: 117).

Was the US involved in Zelaya's overthrow? The available evidence suggests that Honduran political forces made all the crucial decisions in this drama.[6] In particular, there is no indication that US diplomats or CIA agents instigated domestic opposition forces to move against their

6 Even critics such as Main (2010: 15–16) acknowledge that "no evidence has yet emerged of direct US involvement in the coup." Note that the "yet" in this quote reveals an "automatic" belief in US involvement that the present analysis critically examines.

wayward president.[7] Internal elites had their own powerful reasons to worry about Zelaya's surprising ideological mutation. Given Zelaya's limited chances of success, they over-reacted and panicked at the sight of their president following in Chávez's footsteps. Washington was displeased at this prospect as well, but this preference does not imply that the US acted on it, especially not in a leading role. Because Zelaya was bound to turn any evidence of US involvement to his advantage, the Northern superpower seems to have stayed on the sidelines in this deepening crisis.

When the coup forced the US to take a position, the Obama administration again refrained from taking the lead. After regional mediation efforts failed, Washington played for time, hoping that the new presidential elections scheduled for November 2009 would resolve the Honduran crisis. This outcome eventually prevailed, but mainly by default rather than due to active influence by the United States. Thus, Washington assumed no guiding role in the unfolding and dissipation of this crisis, which simply faded from international attention.

In sum, the US, with all its arsenal of economic, political, and military resources, proved unable to prevent the turn toward the contestatory left in several Latin American countries. For the first time ever, the supposed "hegemon" faced a coordinated grouping of nations that pursued a counter-hegemonic, anti-imperialist course. Besides the internal dismantling of market reforms and the suffocation of democracy, this left-populist club, organized in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), established and tightened relations with international adversaries of the hemispheric superpower , such as China, Russia, and even Iran under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which Washington had condemned as a rogue regime. Although the US bristled at these international alliances and regarded the connection to Iran as a worrisome provocation, it found no way of responding effectively and restoring control over its direct sphere of influence.

After all, with his generous petro-diplomacy, ALBA leader Chávez garnered support from small and micro-states in the region and thus commanded enough strength in the Organization of American States to

7 WikiLeaks unearthed no evidence of US instigation. On the contrary, as the crisis heated up in mid-June 2009, Ambassador Hugo Llorens counseled the Honduran military against any intervention (<www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TEGUCIGALPA465_a.html>); and he advised Congress right before the coup not to remove Zelaya from office (<www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TEGUCIGALPA501_a.html>). On the ethics and professionalism of using WikiLeaks documents for scholarly research, see Michael (2015: 178–182).

block pressures from the US and its Latin American allies. Moreover, even nations averse to Chávez's contentious rhetoric, especially Brazil, found it tactically useful to cooperate with this anti-American populist. In this way, President Lula da Silva could claim the role of a moderating force and enhance his leadership in South America. Therefore, President George W. Bush found little backing for his initially confrontational stance against the Venezuelan leftist. Having failed in this way, Bush eventually backed off and his Democratic successor disengaged even more. As these moves toward prudence indicated, the US resigned itself to a situation that clearly violated its interests, but that it had no real capacity to change. Even in its own "backyard," the influence of the global superpower proved distinctly limited. The US could not forestall turns toward left-populist authoritarianism and assert its preference for liberal, pluralist democracy.

While Washington was unable to thwart harmful activities by contestatory governments, it proved more successful in defending allies that faced serious challenges, especially politically motivated violence. Massive economic and military support helped Colombia combat long-festering guerrilla insurgencies with increasing effectiveness. With US encouragement and backing, Bogotá reestablished control over large swaths of the national territory and thus laid the groundwork for preserving the institutions of liberal, pluralist democracy from left-wing insurgents and from hardcore right-wingers.

Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) concentrated power and tried to run roughshod over checks and balances (Kline 2009: chap. 8), but the country's civil society and institutional framework, especially the autonomous Constitutional Court, proved resilient and contained these tendencies toward illiberalism. In particular, they succeeded in blocking Uribe's attempt to run for a second consecutive reelection, which would have allowed the incumbent to prolong and enhance his domineering leadership. After Uribe had to hand over power, Colombia's democracy gradually recovered and gained greater vibrancy and higher quality (Mayka 2016; Taylor 2016). Thus, through its sustained support for a struggling and rather defective democracy, the US helped to prevent further deterioration and to bring about an eventual turnaround.

Reasons for the Limited Influence of the US

This wide-ranging assessment of US efforts to shape regime developments in its direct sphere of influence has yielded the unexpected conclusion that, since 1934, the Northern superpower has mostly played a fairly restrained role, has found it difficult to achieve its goals, and has seen its influence diminish significantly over time. For decades, the US has not exerted hegemony, especially not over Mexico and South America. That is, Washington has not managed to guarantee compliance with its major expectations and exhortations, nor have Latin American countries refrained from offering resistance on crucial issues. Even in Central America, Washington has struggled to face down disagreement and challenges, as shown by the 11 years of revolutionary Sandinista rule (1979–1990) and the determined push of reelected Daniel Ortega toward authoritarianism (2006–present). It is noteworthy that the Northern superpower cannot impose its will on such a small, dependent country.

The limited influence of the US would be especially puzzling for a basic force model of power (cf. March 1966). After all, the global colossus has an immeasurable military predominance over its Southern neighbors, which it used freely from 1898 to 1934. However, this imperialism showed that armed attacks and invasions bring uncertain benefits and create a variety of domestic and international costs for their perpetrator. The strengthening of many Latin American states and the professionalization of their militaries further increased these costs during the twentieth century. Whereas countries racked by civil war and run with private armies could be taken over by a few thousand Marines, invading *chavista* Venezuela, for instance, would be an undertaking of completely different magnitude, carrying enormous risk. Moreover, with the de-legitimation of warfare in global – especially Western – public opinion, the open use of military force would nowadays elicit a powerful international backlash. US society would probably also oppose such adventures, especially after the debacle in Vietnam and the recent failures in Iraq. Consequently, since 1934 the US has employed military force only against targets in Latin America that lack the capacity for resistance, namely microstate Grenada and mini-state Panama. By contrast, despite his undisguised hostility toward the Sandinistas, even Ronald Reagan did not order the Marines to take over Nicaragua – the jungles of Central America looked too similar to those of Vietnam.

Thus, because "basic force" has not proved decisive, it is crucial to adopt a force activation model. Although the US has overwhelming military capacity, it faces important domestic and international constraints that often hinder the effective use of this capacity. Military force

is a very blunt instrument that is not easy to employ for influencing political regime developments inside other countries. For instance, it would not be credible to threaten Haiti with armed action in order to ensure that elections are held on schedule. Even President Trump would not garner sufficient internal support and foreign impact if he were to use these kinds of tactics. In sum, the conditions for the US to activate its force are quite restrictive, and the political efficacy of force for shaping the fate of political regimes in Latin America is questionable.

When the sword remains sheathed, other forms of pressure lack reliable means of enforcement. During the decades of the Cold War, the perceived common threat of Communism led many Latin American countries to huddle under the protective wings of the Northern superpower, but even then they adopted this posture out of a convergence of interests, not due to Washington's persuasion or pressure. Moreover, the end of the Cold War has encouraged Southern states to pursue their own national interests and political preferences with considerable independence. Accordingly, they have diversified their international economic and political linkages, which has allowed these nations, especially in South America, to counterbalance US efforts to exert leverage. The massive increase of their economic exchanges with China in the new millennium has further boosted this autonomy.

Latin America's new partners, starting with Europe and Japan, tend to embrace greater ideological pragmatism than the US; therefore, they do not promote economic principles and political regime preferences with the same zeal. Apart from the UK since the Margaret Thatcher era, these extra-hemispheric countries are not as committed to free-market liberalism; and because their party systems have long harbored important left-wing forces, they are less concerned about moves toward "socialism" and the concomitant deviations from the strict rules of liberal, pluralist democracy. Consequently, European pragmatism has for many years counterbalanced US pressures. This passive resistance first came to the fore in the Central American conflicts of the 1980s, when Europe's continued economic and political cooperation with Sandinista Nicaragua helped to undermine the economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation efforts spearheaded by the Reagan administration.

Given the striking economic predominance of the US in the Western hemisphere, Washington's pressures are more effective when Latin America suffers from serious economic problems, as they prevailed especially during the region-wide debt crisis of the 1980s and the subsequent adoption of market reforms. But even under those dire circumstances, external influence remained limited. The international financial

institutions (IFIs) that the US entrusted with taking the lead in structural adjustment and neoliberal change often found spotty compliance with their exhortations; even loan conditionality lacked reliable bite (Kahler 1992; Vreeland 2003).

The use of economic instruments for political goals faces even greater obstacles. Fear of economic sanctions and of plummeting investor confidence was certainly key in pushing President Fujimori to open up the authoritarian regime imposed with his self-coup of 1992 and to convoke elections, as mentioned above. But these liberalizing moves remained at the surface and did not transform the core of Fujimori's regime, which most scholars classify as competitive authoritarianism (Carrión 2006; Levitsky and Loxton 2013). Fujimori and his top aides systematically distorted formally democratic procedures and guaranteed his continued domination through the unfair use of governmental resources, tight control over the media, and systematic harassment of the opposition. Consequently, whereas Colombia's democratic institutions blocked President Uribe's quest for a second consecutive reelection, Fujimori did manage to engineer this undemocratic feat (but his corruption-ridden regime collapsed from within soon thereafter). In sum, while external economic pressures made a political difference in Peru, closer inspection reveals that these pressures affected regime form more than substance and failed to restore effective democracy.

The legacies of early US interventions also hindered the exertion of influence in subsequent decades. After all, "the gringos" did act rather heavy-handedly during the first third of the twentieth century. Moreover, the US undertook a number of clumsy and ill-fated efforts thereafter, such as instigation of the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba in 1961, and a host of covert actions in Chile during the 1960s and early 1970s, which were most disastrous in the immediate aftermath of Salvador Allende's election, when Chilean right-wingers with prior CIA connections made a rather harebrained attempt at a coup (Harmer 2012: 56–64). Because a broad spectrum of Latin Americans have condemned these "destabilization" efforts (cf. Stodden and Weiss 2017) as violations of national sovereignty and interference in internal affairs, the US has faced an increasing cost for any further involvement, and the threshold at which Latin Americans declare US influence as illegitimate has fallen so much that even financial subsidies for NGOs can nowadays be lambasted as coup attempts. Accordingly, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro has used frequent "revelations" of foreign conspiracies as one of the last straws for shoring up his crisis-rocked regime. This desperate invention of alleged plots

appeals to a substrate of anti-Americanism that reflects widespread rejection of the well-known earlier instances of US imperialism.

Washington noticed the growing resentment in Latin America decades ago and considered it in planning its efforts to influence regime developments in the region. For instance, the US did not provide ample subsidies to centrist and right-wing parties for Chile's presidential election of 1970, which Marxist Allende won, to President Nixon's great consternation. One reason for this self-restraint was that the US and its West German allies had channeled millions of dollars to the Christian Democrats in 1964, and this external backing had caused a strong backlash (*FRUS 1969-1976*, vol. 21: 77, 86, 89, 94). Similarly, the US deliberately avoided any direct participation in the conspiracies to oust Brazilian President Goulart in 1964 and Chile's Allende in 1973 so that these incumbents could not use leaked evidence of such involvement to whip up nationalism, discredit the coup plotters as lackeys of the hegemon, and in these ways safeguard their precarious position (*FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. 31: 422, 427–428, 437; *FRUS 1969-1976*, vol. 21: 813–814, 867–868, 881–884). Thus, Washington was fully aware of the risk that contacts with rebellious generals could inflame anti-American sentiment and prove counterproductive. Necessary caution confined the US to watching the denouement of high-stakes crises mostly from the sidelines.

Subsequent experiences of US involvement, such as President Reagan's incessant (though rather ineffectual) harassment of Sandinista Nicaragua, further intensified these nationalist sentiments in Latin America. Moreover, this anti-imperialism has found greater resonance because increasing linkages to extra-hemispheric nations have given Latin American countries autonomy and latitude. They can now afford to react in more allergic ways to any US effort to exert undue influence. The recent massive entry of China into the Western Hemisphere and the global commodities boom, which substantially loosened economic constraints, further boosted these anti-hegemonic tendencies. As a result, Washington has faced rather stringent constraints, which became evident in its powerlessness before the radical-populist left. As the superpower's former sins exact a lasting political price, its influence has weakened substantially, even in its own sphere of interest. Force activation faces important obstacles.

Conclusion

An important line of recent scholarship argues that great powers can shape the selection and change of political regimes among weaker countries, especially in their sphere of influence (see, e.g., Boix 2011 and Narizny 2012). In this vein, one branch of diffusion research has emphasized coercion as a mechanism that drives the spread of innovations. Wide-ranging analyses have confirmed that the global rise and fall of hegemonic powers is associated with corresponding waves of regime change. For instance, as Gunitsky (2017) has demonstrated, the defeat of autocratic powers in war and the victory of liberal-democratic states went hand in hand with the proliferation of democracy; by contrast, the economic recovery and geopolitical rise of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia was quickly followed by the spread of fascist and Communist regimes, respectively. Well-known cases such as the institution of democracy in US-occupied Germany and Japan after the Second World War provide further evidence for the great power theory.

To assess these arguments, the present essay has examined US relations with Latin America. Given the striking superiority of the Northern superpower in economic, political, and military resources, this assessment focuses on "most likely cases" for the great power theory. If overwhelming power can indeed shape regime outcomes, then the Western Hemisphere should provide ample evidence. Indeed, Washington has long seen itself as the protagonist of liberal democracy in the world. This missionary zeal has prompted numerous US attempts at regime promotion. The hegemonic theory expects these interventionist efforts to produce a good deal of success, especially in the superpower's home region.

However, my wide-ranging investigation of US–Latin American relations casts doubts on the great power approach, especially the arguments about coercion. While the US did engage in uninhibited imperialism during the first third of the twentieth century, it has proceeded with considerable restraint since then. Moreover, Washington's influence has only had a limited impact. Last not least, US clout has diminished significantly over time. Nowadays, the superpower's influence over regime development in Latin America does not run at a high level.

Specifically, where the US employed military force, as in the circum-Caribbean from 1898 to 1934, it rarely achieved the intended results. None of the countries invaded during those decades established a liberal regime, let alone democracy. Throughout the twentieth century, imposition only worked when it was used selectively to free tiny countries from brutal dictators, namely Grenada from coup-makers Bernard Coard and Hudson Austin in 1983 and Panama from kleptocrat Manuel Noriega in

1989. In those small states, US intervention did usher in successful transitions to democracy.

During the Cold War, the US prioritized anti-Communism over the institution of liberal democracy and often encouraged and supported the installation of conservative dictatorships. This endorsement of a presumed lesser evil prevailed especially after the Cuban Revolution, until the mid-1970s (Brown 2017). Yet, in the imposition of these anti-Communist autocracies, Washington's role and impact were limited. After all, Latin America's socioeconomic, political, and military elites had their own grave concerns about the danger of left-wing radicalism. Therefore, even without US instigation, these powerful sectors did everything they could to forestall this perceived threat, which was highly salient after Castro's takeover of power and subsequent radicalization; these fears were then revived in Central America after the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979. Due to the strong affinities in threat perceptions and the fundamental coincidence of interests, status-quo defenders in Latin America, particularly the armed forces, took the lead in combating Communism. Because many professional militaries had powerful reasons of their own to squash leftist radicalism, the US did not need to push very hard. As Latin American elites were determined to act anyway and commanded the means to assert their interests, US influence was not crucial for the eventual outcome.

However, on two occasions – namely, in Cuba and Nicaragua – revolutionaries managed to win power and, for the sake of self-protection, destroyed the old regime's military. In these cases, internal elites lacked the wherewithal to defend the established sociopolitical order. Where the US took the lead in trying to strangle leftist radicalism from the outside, success was strikingly limited. The Castro brothers survived the punitive measures imposed under 11 US administrations. Even the Sandinistas in weak Nicaragua, surrounded by enemies, held out for more than a decade against the US's arsenal of hostility. Similarly, despite an economic collapse, the Chávez/Maduro regime in Venezuela has held out for almost two decades, using anti-American rhetoric as one of the few remaining weapons in its desperate efforts to cling to power.

Even in its own "backyard," therefore, the US has not managed to use its overwhelming capability advantage to successfully shape regime trajectories. After the failure in Vietnam, the supposed hegemon has become gun-shy and has rarely employed its military advantage. Other mechanisms, such as linkage and leverage, do not reliably produce the intended outcomes, as shown by the rise of populist leftism and the moves toward competitive authoritarianism in Venezuela, Nicaragua,

Ecuador, and Bolivia in the new millennium. Washington's soft power has been foiled by the solidarity among Latin American presidents, who long acquiesced in the strangulation of democracy and in discriminatory attacks on the political opposition in neighboring countries, as the ineffectiveness of the Organization of American States in the Venezuelan crisis demonstrates (*contra* Pevehouse 2005).

The predominance of negative results in a most-likely-case study constitutes a noteworthy finding that puts great-power and coercion arguments in perspective. While authoritarian or totalitarian great powers have no compunctions about using force and while non-democratic regimes can effectively be imposed with force, a liberal-democratic superpower faces much greater constraints. Accountability to the citizenry restricts the use of military means; and coercive outside intervention is not particularly well-suited for installing democracy. After all, efforts to impose liberty can suffer from a self-contradiction and prompt a nationalist backlash that plays into the hands of non-democratic forces.

Moreover, while it is tempting to attribute waves of democracy at the end of global confrontations to the promotional activities of victorious liberal powers, domestic mechanisms may be at play. Mobilization for warfare tends to empower the lower strata and thus unleashes demands for political participation, as was clear as far back as ancient Athens, 2500 years ago. Thus, hegemonic conflict can have important domestic repercussions that do not result from great power push, as in Britain's move toward universal suffrage at the end of the First World War. In many other cases, as in Eastern Europe after the First World War and in Africa after the end of the Cold War, countries adjust to the prevailing *Zeitgeist* and learn from the victory of democratic powers even without direct pressure. Thus, correlations between global power transitions and the tides of democracy in the world do not need to be the result of active great power influence, let alone coercion – as Gunitsky (2017) acknowledged by invoking a variety of hard and soft causal mechanisms.

Last but not least, there is a measurement issue. Great power and coercion arguments concentrate on demonstrating the direct and indirect impact that powerful countries seem to have exerted on regime developments elsewhere. In particular, they have highlighted that great powers managed to make a difference. While this is a valid result, there is another way of looking at the issue, which is by asking how often and to what extent great powers achieved their goals. This higher standard is, by its nature, harder to reach. In many episodes in Latin America, the US made some difference, but did not achieve its goals, as noticed by Jimmy

Carter when pressuring South American dictatorships or by Bill Clinton when helping to restore the elected leader of Haiti. The most spectacular instance of a divergence between impact and goal achievement is, of course, revolutionary Cuba, where US pressure was effective, but only in terms of helping to radicalize the regime and to consolidate its long-standing stranglehold over the island! Thus, even where great powers matter, they often do not get their way and can sometimes "shoot themselves in the foot."

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Limitaciones de la Influencia de los Estados Unidos: La Promoción del Cambio de Régimen en América Latina

Resumen: Muchos investigadores asumen que, como superpotencia global, los Estados Unidos han tenido una gran influencia y un fuerte impacto sobre los cambios de régimen político en el mundo. El presente artículo hace una evaluación crítica de estos argumentos, concentrándose en el caso latinoamericano. Investigando la región dominada más directamente por los EUA, el artículo utiliza un diseño de "caso más probable." Las experiencias de países como Brasil, Chile, Haití, Nicaragua y Venezuela muestran que, desde hace muchos años, la influencia de EUA ha sido relativamente limitada y que ha disminuido a lo largo del tiempo. La superpotencia del Norte se ha involucrado menos y ha tenido un menor impacto sobre los cambios de régimen que el que muchos observadores postulan, como demuestra el análisis de los golpes militares en Brasil en 1964 y en Chile en 1973. Además, naciones que han mantenido conexiones densas y extensas con los EUA, como por ejemplo Venezuela, han descendido hacia un "autoritarismo competitivo," mientras que un país como Haití, sobre el cual los EUA tienen un enorme poder de presión, ha fallado en el esfuerzo de establecer una democracia que funcione apropiadamente. En conclusión, aun en su esfera de influencia directa, el país más poderoso en el mundo contemporáneo parece enfrentar limitaciones en su capacidad de promover o prevenir cambios del régimen político.

Palabras clave: América Latina, Estados Unidos, régimen político, democracia, superpotencia, promoción del cambio de régimen